

On the Lap of Mother Nature

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No babe in quest of comfort or security could find them better anywhere than on his or her mother's lap. In the world of the adult, this sense of comfort and security would be on a different plane. Here the adult, together with the younger, would find in nature an even more enduring and un-aging mother, a mother who would readily respond to any and every call from men, women and children. For the motherhood of nature continually rejuvenates itself. We do continually see it through the changes of seasons. At the same time, the vastness of the diverse ecosystems which surround us in the world we live in, is also refreshing and revitalizing. More than twenty-five centuries ago, before the world of today puts forward its Biophilia Hypothesis, in its attempt to arrest the degradation of the biota and reduce the risk of diminishment of the human prospect, Buddhist thinking had known this vital relationship between what they then called man and nature, or man and his environment.

Buddhists of the sixth century B.C. in India had no doubt derived a considerable amount of this thinking from their contemporaries like the Jains. These early Indians boldly labeled the plant world as unicellular living things [*ekindriyam pāṇam*]. The Buddha, in his respect for this world view, and in collaboration with it, went so far as to call upon his direct disciples, the *bhikkhus*, to refrain from causing injury or any form of harm [*pātavyatam*] to plant life. The word used here for the plant world is *bhūta-gāma*, and it literally means the 'entire host of living things'. The Indians held the view that plants were living things [*jīva-saññino hi manussā rukkhasmiṃ*. Vin. IV. 34 Pacittiya 11.]. This seems to make much more sense than the popular assumption that celestial beings or divinities, i.e. *devatā* resided in trees [*rukkha-devatā*]. We know of stories of old where men and women in ancient India addressed their prayers to

divinities in trees for the gift of children and those guileless ancients firmly believed that their prayers were favourably answered. The well known story of Cakkhupāla Thera in the Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā amplifies this [DhA.I.part I. p.2.]

The concept of *bhūta-gāma* as living things here covers a wide range and includes seeds, bulbs, roots, tubers etc. In fact, the Buddha requested his disciples of recognized seniority within his order [*upasampannā*] not to go out on their rounds or *cārikā* during the rainy season in order that they may not damage the green grass and the sprouting young seedlings of the season [... *vassam 'pi cārikaṃ caranti haritāni tiṇāni sammaddantā ekindriyaṃ jīvaṃ viheṭhentā*. Vin.1.137]. Their respect for green grass is seen to be very high. Buddhist monastic discipline forbids monks from discharging urine or fecal matter on grassy land. Sources of water, like the rivers and lakes, with their aquatic life, were equally respected. This ban equally applies to them.

Growing and cultivating of trees to serve the needs of man is something well known to the Buddhists. It is upheld as a great virtue leading to good results here and hereafter. Many great ancient Indian cities like Rājagraha and Srāvasti had, in addition to their natural forest reserves or *jāta-vana* coming down from the Himalayan range [*Bahi nagare Himavantena saddhiṃ ekābaddhaṃ hutvā ṭhitam sayam jāta-vanam atthi*. DA.I.309], large extents of forests grown by man called ropita-vana. The celebrated Jeta's Grove, known in Buddhist texts as Jeta-vana which was a very popular resort of the Buddha, is said to be such a forest track, planted and developed by Prince Jeta himself [*Tam hi Jetena Rājakumārena ropitam samvaḍḍhitam paripālitam. So ca tassa sāmī ahosi*. MA.I.60].

Buddhism encourages the planting of park lands and forest glades [*ārāma-ropā vana-ropā*], holding out such activities as virtues which would take the humans who do so to heavenly worlds [*te janā sagga-gāmino* SN.I.. 33]. Trees and the forests are to be respected. They are grown and maintained, and taken care of to serve the needs of man. It is therefore enjoined that `whosoever enjoys

some comfort, sitting or sleeping under the shade of a tree, shall not tear down its branches ' [Na tassa sākhā bhañjeyya]. That is called being treacherous to nature. The ethics of this injunction appears to have been widely accepted and respected in the Indian society of the day. In the Buddhist Jātaka collection, we have discovered this verse appearing in six different places, independent of one another [Jātaka Pāli vv. 1503, 2129, 3478, 4329, 5713, 5851]. It also appears at Pv. v. 259.

*Yassa rukkhassa chāyāya nisīdeyya sayeyya vā
Na tassa sākhā bhañjeyya mittadubbho hi pāpako.*

Before we proceed much further, let us make it quite clear that this sensitivity in Buddhism to sylvan beauty is something which is distinctly outstanding. It assumes almost a spiritual glow. A beautiful verse attributed to the great stalwart in the Buddhist dispensation, the venerable Sariputta Thera, flashes this idea vividly across the Buddhist horizon when it says

Delightful are these forest tracts,
where commoners fail to take delight.
But those gone beyond lustful cravings:
they constantly rejoice therein.
For they seek not after sensual pleasures.

[Translated by the author]

*Ramañiyān' aranyāni yattha na ramati jano
Vītarāgā ramissantī na te kāmāgavesino.*

Theragāthā / Sāriputtatthera

This attitude to sylvan beauty or the fascination of the forest is given both as an asset and an acquisition of the transcendental elite like the venerable Sariputta referred to above who had reached their desired heights, and as an

unfailing stimulus to those who are keen on their spiritual ascent. Meet the venerable Thera Usabha, who on seeing the luscious growth of a clump of trees, aloft a scraggy cliff, gains a stimulating delight which pushes him along the path of spiritual escalation. Note how he describes his experience.

These never-moves [= *nagā*, i.e. trees]
 Aloft the scraggy cliff,
 Luscious in their growth so high above,
 Drenched freshly by virgin heavenly clouds.

[Translated by the author]

Nagā nagaggesu susamvirūḥhā
Udagga-meghena navena sittā

Thag. v. 110

Thera Usabha's mind was already pre-set and groomed for this kind of vision. The verse quoted above continues to tell us that this Thera was, by his very nature, a forest-lover and a seeker after solitude [*vivekakāmassa araññaṣaṇṇino*]. The text speaks of this monk, after this experience he has been through, as being highly spiritually elated [*janeti bhiyyo usabhasya kalyataṃ*. Thag. v. 110]. The word *kalyataṃ* used here implies a state of spiritual readiness for further culture and growth. The Commentary on this tells that the monk soon nurtured and developed his vision with regard to the real nature of things in the world or *tilakkhaṇa* [i.e. the ability to view the world as being constantly subject to change and therefore being unsatisfactory and guideless / supportless] and gained his enlightenment. Thera Ekavihariya clinches in one single verse the entire Buddhist attitude to the forests when he speaks of the Buddha as one who spoke highly of the forest: Let me alone to the forest resort, the place much praised by the Buddha [*Handa eko gamissāmi araññaṃ Buddhavaṇṇitam*..Thag. v.537].

In addition to this concept of the forest as a vast and dominant segment of nature, there are countless instances of Buddhist disciples isolating single frames of nature and dwelling on their spiritually elevating or soul-lifting character, if the use of such a phrase may be conceded. The beauty of rocks or *selā*, all around in the Indian landscape, seems to have arrested the attention of many a disciple. Scraggy and rugged in shape and looking pretty in their distantly seen blue hues [*nīlabbavaṇṇā rucirā* = beautiful and of the colour of blue clouds], with cool and clear waters flowing down their sides, the rocky mountains are said to delight the forest-dwelling monks [*Te selā ramayanti mam* . Thag. v. 13]. Another sees beauty in broad rocky slopes with clear water over them [*acchodikā puthusilā*] which are draped in slimy green moss [*ambusevālasaṃchannā*]. It is interesting to recollect that Zen Buddhist monks are full of such reckoning.

As part of the environmental heritage there come the birds and the beasts of the wild. Thera Sappaka sees the white-plumed cranes which are threatened by the black rain-clouds, taking to their wings in search of a place of shelter. At a time like this, he says, the River Ajakaraṇī with which he was obviously familiar, delights his heart. He apparently knew the grandeur of the river on the advent of the rains. With true poetic vision he integrates the white-plumed birds, the dark rain clouds and the swelling river all in one, and garnishes it with a dressing of dread of the birds on one side and the rising joy within his heart on the other.

Sappaka is a Buddhist disciple and we see his indomitable poetic excellence bursting forth as he sings of the beauty of rose-apple trees laden with fruit.

Kannu tattha na ramenti
Ubhato jambuyo tahim
Sobhenti āpagā kūlaṃ
Mama lenenassa pacchato.

Theragāthā / Sappaka Thera

Whose heart will they not delight --
 Those rose-apple trees on both banks there?
 At the back of my rocky ledge,
 They adorn the river banks.

Translated by the author

His lyrics, we would compare with the best we have known in English literature, of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He seems to insinuate: Now that the roaring waters of the river have carried away down stream the frog-devouring river snakes, the hosts of frogs are melodiously singing in glee.

*Tāmatamada-saṅghasuppahīnā
 bhekā mandavatī panādayanti.*

Thag. v. 310

It is no time for me to leave the mountain-streams today, he says emphatically. My river Ajakarani is safe, supreme and delightful, he adds further. What a delightful blend in harmony of man and nature?

*Nājja girinadīhi vippavāsasamayo
 Khemā Ajakaranī sivā surammā.*

loc. cit.